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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experiences of student teachers and teacher educators at Bank Street College of Education, New York as they use the portfolio process to construct and reconstruct an educational vision through the telling and writing of stories. After describing the use of narrative research in teacher education, the paper explores the ways that story telling enables teachers to: (1) build and rebuild their educational vision out of their actual practice; (2) articulate and document what is personally and professionally meaningful; and (3) describe and analyze their classroom practices in light of their own stories, their mentors' and peers' stories, and stories of scholars in the field. The paper emphasizes the role of conversation in the story-telling process, explaining that conversations about portfolio construction help individuals to reflect and to know themselves more fully. The paper describes portfolio and narrative process, learning through narrative, and caveats regarding narrative practice. Overall, students at Bank Street College demonstrated that the telling of stories and related conversations led them to recognize the importance of articulating their practices and the beliefs behind them. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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Narrative Practices: Portfolios in Teacher Education

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Narrative Practices: Portfolios In Teacher Education

by
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Rationalists wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
they confine themselves to right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
Rationalists would wear sombreros

excerpt from *Six Significant Landscapes* by
Wallace Stevens in Maxine Greene (1996)

In a 1996 address to the Lincoln Center Institute, Maxine Greene refers to this poem by Wallace Stevens to awaken educators to a sense of possibility. She points out how Wallace does not strike out at rationalists for what they do but uses metaphor to orient the reader to new openings, "to fresh vantage points even on square rooms" (Greene, 1996). The rhomboids, waving lines, ellipses work to extend the perspective of the reader. By moving both into and beyond the language of the familiar, new visions are possible, visions that allow for the ways in which different cultures, different languages, different experiences may shape the process of making meaning.

Like the metaphors used by Wallace, the language of story provides teacher educators with access to a broader range of personal and cultural orientations and experiences. It does not diminish the contribution of the rationalists but makes room for and honors alternative perspectives. By telling and listening to stories, educators are better able to move beyond their own experience, to recognize the ways in which common needs and aims may be differently addressed, and to develop, not only a factual knowledge base, but a "narrative imagination" that better

prepares them to decipher and understand the words and actions of their students and their colleagues (Nussbaum, p.12, 1997).

There are many forms of narrative practice currently employed in teacher education. These include but are not limited to the use of case studies, dialogue journals, the writing of personal and family educational biographies, and portfolios. The goal of each is to promote the integration of theory and practice while engendering respectful dialogue and broad understanding. They are deeply grounded in the Deweyan perspective that 1) true education involves a restructuring of an individual's thinking in ways that increase the complexity and integration of prior knowledge and experience and 2) to attain this goal, teachers -- and by extension, teacher educators -- must have a thorough understanding of who the learners are and how they make sense of the world as well as a thorough understanding of content matter in their field of study (Dewey, 1938).

This paper will focus on the use of portfolio as narrative practice. It describes the experiences of teachers and teacher educators at Bank Street College of Education as they use the portfolio process to construct and reconstruct an educational vision through the telling of story. It explores the ways in which story telling enables teachers 1) to build and rebuild their educational vision out of the actual practice in which they engage, 2) to articulate and document what is personally and professionally meaningful, and 3) to describe and analyze their classroom practices in light of their own stories, the stories of their mentors and peers, and the stories and theories of scholars in the field. It pays particular attention to the role of conversation in the story telling process -- the ways in which conversation enhances the coming together of philosophy and practice, and, ultimately, the ways in which conversation provides a context that enables "cover stories" in which transformative visions of education have little relationship to what goes in classrooms to become "stories to live by" in which vision and practice are

mutually informing components of one's professional life (Clandinin, Portfolio Conference, 1998).

> *I came to see how deeply rooted my ideas are in my personal as well as my professional beliefs. I came to see how my work did not always connect with my beliefs, and I struggled with myself around those issues. (Alice, 5/97)*

Narrative Research in Teacher Education

Narrative research in teacher education is a relatively new phenomenon. Until recently, the voices of teachers have been little valued as a source of insight about teaching and learning. Their stories have been discounted, viewed as personal anecdote with few implications for the field at large. The changed status with which teachers' stories are regarded emerges from a recognition that no single story describes effective teaching nor does a single story tyell ho one becomes an effective teacher. Even when stories are shared, they are subject to different meanings by different people in different contexts (Bruner, 1985; Riessman, 1993; Huberman, 1995).

Narrative research challenges the old assumptions. It acknowledges the ways in which individual teachers make sense of their experiences provide lessons for the field. It acknowledges that personal stories are more than a way of telling about one's life; they are the means by which professional identities are fashioned.

Through stories, teachers discover the kinds of teachers they are and the kinds of teachers they hope to be. It may not always be possible to take teachers' stories at face value, but the stories provide important data about the shape and course of the professional journey (Freeman, 1996), data that may not always emerge in more traditional forms of research.

I think that I didn't always understand what I was writing when I first began studying to be a teacher. But that is O.K. Now I do. I think you have to have stories to grow into. (Maria, 2/98)

Portfolio and Narrative Research

In some ways narrative research is similar to more traditional forms of research. Teachers tell their stories; researchers then condense the stories and draw meaning from within and across the participants (Huberman, 1995, p.128). Teachers are rarely equal partners in the meaning making process. Research on portfolios is subject to the same critique. However, within the process itself, there is a significant difference. The narrative practices in portfolio can be construed as a form of action research, a form in which the object of study is oneself - one's beliefs, one practices, and the continuities or discontinuities between the two.

In the process, there appears to be a fusing of what Bruner (1985) refers to as the narrative (story) and the paradigmatic (argument) modes of representation. Like an ethnography, the portfolio process requires the individual to describe then explain, to present evidence then to argue its significance. The findings of the researcher may be informative; the findings of the individual are more likely to be transformative.

The narrative practices in portfolio practice that facilitate the study of self are two fold: story telling and story writing. In each, the role of conversation is a key component. It is through the conversation with peers and mentors that the story takes form. The nuances of detail that convey the full meaning of an experience are fleshed out as others listen and respond to a presentation of an artifacts that are held to be marker of professional growth. Engaged in discussions about the meaning of the experience, the ways in which it has impacted on an individual's teaching and learning, and the ways it connects to theory, students stretch themselves and their colleagues.

Maria's Story

Midpoint during the portfolio process, Maria came into her mentor's office. She was visibly distraught. "I just don't understand," she said. "I thought people meant the things they said." Her mentor asked Maria what she was thinking about. At which point, Maria told her story. "I work in a school that has a philosophy of inclusiveness. Everybody knows that. I thought that was why they were there - to work together in an inclusive way."

"To me, having a multi-cultural curriculum is really important," Maria said. My three year olds are now studying families. I asked parents to talk to their children about when their child was born or adopted and to send in a baby picture. I have a lot of books in my classroom that talk about different families. I try to include all kinds of stories about all kinds of families - traditional families, single parent families, extended families, same sex families."

" In December," Maria added, " my assistant said to me: 'I have a real problem with having books about gay families and talking about gay families. We shouldn't be teaching them this. We shouldn't touch it at all; it's wrong. I am not going to talk about it. And if the children ask me about it, if they say: Can two men love each other? Can two men be a family? I'm going to say they can't.'"

"Well, it finally happened," Maria said. "I heard her telling children that two mommies or two daddies could not be a family. I am not in the habit of contradicting the people I work with, but I didn't want this message to be sent to the children. I stepped in and said, "Yes, they can." She became very angry and told me she wanted to tell the director that we had this difference of opinion. I think she was hoping that the director would say, 'Don't talk about those nasty things.' So, we went to the director and the opposite happened. The director said, 'This is an inclusive school. This is our philosophy. Keep your personal opinions to yourself. Read the books and talk about this with the children.'"

"But now I have to live with this situation, because, of course, she is not doing it. I don't know what to do. It's awful. I think somehow it belongs in my portfolio, but how?""

Together Maria and her mentor explored the experience. As they talked, question after question spilled forth. " What do I do with her? How do I get her to change?" Then, the thought came, "Do I have a right to make her change?" Turning back to what she was doing in the classroom, Maria asked, "How do I learn to make my classroom more inclusive?" followed by "What kinds of barriers does my assistant's attitude pose? What kinds of support should / could my school offer?" And finally, " Where do I look for answers? How do I turn this into an artifact? What kind of artifact ... in what domain[1]?"

There were no easy answers to these questions. How M would deal with these issues and how she would represent this point on her professional journey were hers to decide, but the dialogue did validate Maria's responses and confirm that the issues she raised were indeed important and complex. The conversation provided a context in which to consider the situation from multiple perspectives, to view these issues in a broader context, a context in which some theoretical frameworks that might speak to both Maria's personal and her professional concerns could be raised.

The dialogue was then extended even further. The following week Maria brought her experience to her peer group meeting. These meetings serve as monthly support groups for portfolio candidates; faculty mentors participate in them as facilitators. Here, Maria once more recounted her story and continued: "This year we have a child in our classroom who has two dads. I would think it was

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[1] Within the context of the portfolio, students are required to document their professional expertise in four domains: curriculum, human development, history and philosophy of education, the social context of learning.

unconscionable anyway to leave out a group of people just because of the way they live, but in these circumstances..."

At this point, Nick commented, "I don't necessarily agree with that, I wouldn't necessarily bring it up. But with a family in the class, it's different."

Maria replied: "I would have the books anyway.. I would not say, "Now children, some people are gay... But we read to the children every day. There are books on the shelves for children to look at by themselves, books with all different kinds of families. The books show single parent families, interracial families, families with two moms, families with two dads. They don't say this is what this family is, but they have a story and in that story there is a child who happens to have two mommies.

"It's not like it's an instructional topic." Lynn added. "I think kids get a message from the books and things you have around the room. If there's nothing there, it sends a message that those people don't matter."

"That's just what I said to my assistant," Maria continued. "The child who sits in the classroom all year and never once sees someone who looks like himself in the books we're reading or in the posters on the wall is not going to be thinking, 'Hey, I never saw someone who looked like my family,' but he is going to take away from that experience a feeling that something is wrong with him. He is likely to feel that there is something about him that is not acceptable. He is likely to think, 'I never saw myself. I must not be good enough; I must not be the right stuff.'"

"You said before that you do not know how to do this multicultural stuff, but it sounds like you do," said Eileen.

"I feel like this is what I am doing, but I feel that there is a lot more that I could be doing. I just don't know what it is" said Maria.

Sara joined in, "I wonder what this says about your role in regard to authority? Are you supposed to be justifying yourself ? Should you be convincing your assistant to think differently?" she asked.

"It never once crossed my mind to doubt the importance of what I was trying to do," Maria said. "I was thinking, how can you possibly think that? No, I am not changing a bit of what I'm doing. And you will have to live with it. It is not like I'm being challenged by anyone who has any authority to challenge me. The school is not telling me to change anything. The school is saying, 'Yes, that is what we want you to do. Keep doing it. No parents are complaining.' "

"So, what is the issue then?" asked Nick.

Maria responded thoughtfully, "I know that the values I am bringing happen to mesh with what my school wants in terms of their philosophy, but suppose I were in a school in which that did not happen. What would I do? Whose values should count? Yes, I think that I am completely right, but then so does my assistant, who thinks otherwise. I think that she is completely wrong but she feels as strongly as I do. We just happen to be in a position where I have the support and she does not."

"Mmmm, you are the teacher and she's the assistant," Nick said. "If it were the other way around, there might be problems."

Maria continued: "I think it is great that I am having this conflict in a safe place, but my assistant keeps refusing to cooperate, and I do not know what to do now. I keep thinking that several years ago this conversation would have been about the presence of faces of color in the books. When most people felt as strongly about race as my assistant does about homosexuality, how did that ever change? There were people who made things change; how did they do it?"

Here , one of the mentors joined in: "This discussion reminds me of Counts' position in *Dare the schools build a new social order?* He talks about how there is no such thing as a neutral teacher..."

Lynn broke in, "I keep thinking that you might find yourself in the position of the assistant teacher some day. You are not always going to be where you are. You are planning to move to a new place and a new school. It could be this issue or it could be any number of millions of issues that you might find yourself at odds with the administration. What would you do if yours was the divergent opinion?"

She continued with a suggestion: "I have a book that might be helpful to you. It's Michael Fullan's *Change Forces* . His whole idea is that if a teacher is not serving as a change agent, he or she is really a traitor. I think Fullan is saying that to startle the reader, but it really makes you think. I took out all these books from the library because I was interested in leadership, not just in education but in business and everywhere . . . and all of these things they talked about as qualities of leaders, I think, are what you need as a teacher . . . motivating people, getting people to do their best, having a vision, having things you believe in. It's the whole idea of the teacher as change agent."

"It's so ironic," Maria said. "I didn't think I was doing anything radical."

Learning through Narrative

In these conversations, students and teacher educators together delve into the complexity of Maria's story. Through the process each participant moves toward a more conscious construction of his or her professional role. The literature tells us that adults, like the children they teach, learn best: when they see new ideas emerge from and become connected to meaningful experience, when they are able to actively engage in making sense of new information and long held beliefs within the context of real-world problems, when they have safe contexts for sharing and examining their beliefs and practices, and when they can use their own interests,

their own strengths, and their self-professed needs as springboards for new learning (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Brookfield, 1986). The narrative practices in portfolio appear to provide these opportunities.

Maria's story began with a description of her commitment to designing and implementing a multi-cultural curriculum. She thought she was doing well at the novice level but was concerned about how limited her approach might be. Her conflict with her assistant forced her to take a new look at what she was doing and how it might be perceived by others. Her conversation around this experience began with her very real feelings of frustration and moved in ever-widening circles. The dialogue began with the details of daily practice and their unanticipated ramifications. It moved to a consideration of the complex relationships between teachers, assistant teachers, and administrators and, then, to a deliberation about the significance of implicit and explicit curriculum practices. Finally, the dialogue turned to issues of change - personal change and social change, what change means and what a teacher's role can and should be as an agent of change.

As Maria told her story to her mentor and her peer group and discussed its significance with them, she began to examine her beliefs and practices at new and deeper levels. Maria came to see that, novice though she was, her practice was more sophisticated and more complex than she had previously believed. Her views and practices were shared by many of those with whom she spoke; the comments they made supported and validated her practice. However, even within this small group, there were those, like Nick, who did not share the particulars of her vision of an inclusive environment or her assumptions about what the role of a teacher in such an environment should be. While Nick, unlike her assistant, supported Maria's goals, he questioned her practices. "I would not necessarily bring up the issue of gay and lesbian families," he said.

As Maria endeavored to provide good and coherent reasons for her practice, she began to clarify a point of view that she had assumed needed no explanation, at least no explanation within the context of a progressive institution. She, and those who immediately agreed with her, began to see that the assumptions they made about how the theory of good early childhood education translates into practice were not universally held.

As they talked, they came to see that the words used to articulate educational vision, goals, and policies could mean different things to different people. They began to understand, on a visceral as well as an intellectual level, the importance of articulating not only their practice but also the thinking behind it. In so doing, they became even more thoughtful about their practice, more cognizant about and critical of the pedagogy they were implementing, more sensitive to and aware of the social contexts in which they were teaching.

As the discussion ensued, Nick listened carefully. Caring deeply about the story his colleague told, he was pushed to reexamine his own definition of inclusion. Considering himself a progressive educator, working in a conservative environment in which his views were considered quite liberal, he too was surprised by the differences between his own thoughts and those of his peers. Their respectful but passionately uttered feelings gave him new food for thought.

At the beginning of this peer group session, Maria had said, " When I write my captions, I really hate responding to the question: 'What did you learn?' I don't know yet. Everything is just emerging. It's too hard to get it down on paper. It keeps evolving." Here, in the context of the group, she is motivated to shape her voice, to put forth her beliefs, to tell what she is learning and why she believes it is important for her and for the children she teaches. Her colleagues respond in kind. They, too, argue their practice, confront the potential passivity of their minds, and

build their stories of professional practice, the stories Clandinin calls "stories to live by" (Portfolio Conference, 1/98, Cambridge, Mass.) .

The conversations around portfolio construction help student "to know" not more but "to know" more fully. The ideas with which they grapple in these conversations are for the most part not new. They have been embedded in numerous components of the teacher education curriculum they have been experiencing for the past two years. What is new are the conversational opportunities for examining ideas and dilemmas within a context that matters to them as individuals and as a group.

In these focused interactive contexts, the role of theory takes on a new meaning. No longer is theory the abstract writing portfolio candidates have been studying throughout the course of their teacher education programs. It becomes a resource for making sense of a dilemma that plagues one of their colleagues and, as they listen to and engage with the dilemma, plagues each of them. In this way, they recognize what Dewey means when he speaks of the classroom not as preparation for but as a microcosm of life. Beginning with an incident that grew out of what one student had construed as "simply good early childhood practice," the group ends up by grappling with many of the most fundamental issues in the field of education today: How do we bring values into the classroom? How do we make schools safe places for everyone -- adult and child? Can individuals with differing value systems work together in a meaningful way? How can teachers be agents of social change? Should they be?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, portfolio candidates begin to look at theory in a new way. Acknowledging one mentor's reference to Counts, they then dig into their own experience to share readings that have made sense to them, readings they think Maria might find helpful. The discussion at this point stands in

sharp contrast to their opening discussion about the difficulty students share in weaving together theory and practice within the portfolio context.

> *Why am I having such a hard time with the whole idea of incorporating theory into my portfolio caption. Why isn't it flowing in the way my writing usually does? (Lynn, 2/98)*

Working together as an interpretative community, students and faculty consider the complexities presented by one's student's dilemma. The process leads toward a new understanding of theory and a more analytic reflection on practice. The reflection emerges from care and from the genuine desire to understand. Participants work hard at learning to hear what their colleagues are trying to say, to understand points of view that may contradict their long held beliefs. They also work hard to honor the efforts of others. As they honor the efforts of others, efforts that are not always successful, it becomes easier to accept and honor their own efforts.

Faculty and students engage in a questioning process not in search of the "right " answer, but because they want to understand each other. Their sharing of story scaffolds the process of critical thought. Asking thoughtful questions of others encourages participants to ask increasingly more thoughtful questions of their own emerging work. In addition, the story form and the conversations around story invite participants to accept the plausibility of the given moment, to suspend skepticism and to embrace the narrative flow of events as an authentic experience from a particular perspective. They then become more willing to consider their own experience from this new perspective (McEwan & Egan, 1995).

> *I am beginning to believe that this is where change starts. It starts in small groups of people talking together. I see myself changing my beliefs about all kinds of things unrelated to my portfolio because of conversations we have had.* (Lynn, 3/98)

Like the waving lines and ellipses of Steven's poem, the conversations around portfolio push at the boundaries of imagination and open new doors to possibility. This is as true for the faculty mentors as it is for the portfolio candidates

> *Mentoring portfolio candidates is challenging and a little bit frightening. This is an organic, changeable process. I am a more linear thinker; portfolio pushes my boundaries as well as those of my students.*
>
> (Gabe, mentor, 6/96)

The rewards and also the challenges of mentoring portfolios derive from the opportunities they present to break down traditional academic structures, to engage with students in new relationships, to make the familiar foreign and the foreign familiar (Freidus, 4/98).

Caveats Regarding Narrative Practice

Narrative practices in portfolio offer a pedagogy of promise. However, meaningful narrative practices do not just happen. The telling of story is not enough. Unexamined stories, decontextualized stories, stories whose telling is not mediated cannot be stories of true possibility.

Narrative practices are most meaningful within a carefully constructed community of learners. There is an inherent asymmetry of relationship between students and faculty in the academic world which must be acknowledged and addressed. Shared dialogue only emerges when participants consciously endeavor to develop relationships of equality and trust.

The creation of dialogue between and among faculty and students builds upon past experiences. At Bank Street there is a process known as advisement, a core component of all pre-service, in-service, and leadership programs in graduate education. During advisement, students meet with faculty advisors on an ongoing basis throughout their year

of fieldwork. They work together to identify and address personal and professional issues that relate to the student's emerging concepts of teaching and learning.

In addition, advisement includes the conference group in which the five to seven students advised by the same faculty member meet together with that faculty member on a weekly basis. The goal of these sessions is to make meaning of their newly emerging personae as teachers. Ayers writes:

> *Advisement (the conference group) was like no other experience I have ever had as a learner. The curriculum was emergent; the experiences we ourselves had were the raw material for reflection and critique. I was a student, but I was also a teacher (1991, p. 28).*

Much of the content of advisement involves building trust and relationships through sharing and reflecting upon stories of practice.

As a result, when students come to the portfolio process, they bring with them a schema of narrative practice. They have learned to engage with faculty members in a relationship that stands outside the boundaries of traditional academic hierarchy. They have learned how to engage in informal conversation in order to articulate practice, to examine ideas, to explore new information and beliefs. Advisement is by no means a necessary prerequisite to the narrative of portfolio, but it makes it easier.

In any pedagogy that centers around narrative practice, it is imperative that time and resources be allocated to the building of trust. This time for community building cannot be short-changed. Opportunities to share personal experiences, to clarify language, to articulate expectations, to see into the world of meaning that individuals bring with them are essential components of effective narrative practice. The process will continue throughout the course of study, but the importance of structures and/or activities that build to this end are particularly important in early sessions. It cannot be expected that most students, or faculty for that matter, will ask hard questions of themselves or others in the first weeks or even months of portfolio construction or any other pedagogy of narrative practice. Nor can

it be expected that trust and analytic reflection will naturally evolve. Successful narrative practice requires careful mediation by knowledgeable and caring faculty.

In the second semester of the portfolio process, one student echoed the thoughts of many of her colleagues when she said:

> *I know I dance around the important issues quite a bit. It's really hard because it's uncomfortable. It is hard to talk about; it is even harder to put down on paper. What is it that is making the writing so difficult? Is it so challenging because we do not know how to write? NO. It is challenging because we are getting at those deep personal raw emotions that encompass our vulnerability . That is what is hard to put on paper. Once you write it, it is real; it is there; you have said it. Plus, you are giving this to other people to read. It is not like it is in your personal journal... I am learning that I can acknowledge that I have a lot to learn without its meaning that I am unworthy, but it is still scary. (Lynn, 3/98)*

When asked what brought them to the point of acknowledging and acting upon these feelings, the group concurred that it was the numerous formal and informal conversations that had been going on throughout the course of the experience. The overlapping stories shared by teachers engaged in a personal goal of portfolio construction engendered a network of support that made it possible to engage in a kind of reflection that moved beyond the simple recount of experience into analysis and questioning.

Conclusion

Huberman (1995) describes narrative practice as an "existential investigation," an investigation of an experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it, and, then, an attempt to distill essential themes. Narratives within portfolio take this investigation one step further by encouraging students to apply these themes in a recursive form of reflection

on their own practice. Faculty mentors facilitate the process, but the story is interpreted by the students themselves, not by a external researchers.

In the process at Bank Street College, students demonstrated that the telling of story and the conversations around those stories do entail such an "existential investigation" into practice. These conversations lead students to recognize the importance of articulating their practices and the beliefs behind them. In so doing, they come to consider their practice in increasingly more complex ways and to redefine their own sense of self as professionals. They appear to cut through many of the traditional confines of academic thought and examine the intersections of their own hopes and fears and those of the children they teach. Thus, the pedagogy of narrative practice appears to contribute to teachers' sense of possibility.

> *Teachers, freed to go in search of their own imagery, to configure their own commonplaces into something fresh and new, are teachers whose very aliveness may become contagious. They go back to their classrooms with a thousand open questions, with a wonder seldom felt before, with desires to work collaboratively for the sake of enriched understanding and perception—desires that can never be fully satisfied, that keep moving them on to the possible, beyond dread and boredom, beyond apathy.*
>
> (Maxine Greene, 1996)

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